COMMON GROUND: Reaching agreement for the continuous improvement of South Carolina's public education system

South Carolina's public schools are demonstrating that using evidence in decision making and maintaining the focus on improvement over time are the cornerstones for the improvements in the state's schools. The schools and their advocates are celebrating rapid gains in student performance on the SAT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the state's standards-based assessments including the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT), the end-of-course examinations in four high school courses and the High School Assessment Program (HSAP). Yet while we are celebrating South Carolina's gains we must acknowledge the need that despite strong improvements in SAT performance, the state's average SAT score ranks last in the nation and our top students score 50 points below top students nationally; despite substantive improvements in PACT performance, students perform less well against the content standards as they progress through the grades; and the percentage of students graduating from high school in either four or five years ranks woefully last among the states.

Is our system making incremental gains in a time that demands transformational progress? Is the infrastructure of the system supportive of deep change? Can public and political attention be focused on fundamental system questions, even when those issues do not offer immediate resolution or respond to a readily identifiable constituency?

Too often in our state and others, the focus of change within the educational system is anchored in the political time line, the immediate attention of varied constituencies, and the degree to which a change initiative can be purchased without significantly changing the revenue structure. Today policymakers are asked to improve SAT scores, provide universal access to four-year old kindergarten, buy school busses, reduce student obesity, expand support for reading at higher levels, provide home-schoolers access to public schools, reduce class size, and add career exploration to middle and high school programs. Policymakers feel the pressure to remedy the immediate problems and may have inadequate opportunity to build fundamental components of a highly effective system.

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Within its work the EOC has recognized the inordinate cost of under-educating South Carolina's young people. Were South Carolina's young people to graduate from high school at the average rate nationally, rather than 51 percent, an additional $5 million in income taxes alone (just between the income levels of those with high school diplomas and those without) as well as millions in other taxes or savings from reductions in public assistance and support in health care, housing, and food programs would be available to the state.[1] Currently, the public education system struggles to provide additional learning experiences for students who fall behind early in their school careers. Yet the state must assume the inordinate expenses associated with a correctional system in which 54 percent of inmates read below the ninth grade level and only 39 percent have earned a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED).[2] In 2003 the average per pupil expenditure in public schools was slightly over $7,200 while the state correctional system's per inmate expenditure was slightly over $13,900. The cost of under-educating our young people overwhelms any costs related to provide additional learning experiences to achieve success earlier.

The Education Oversight Committee (EOC) bears statutory responsibility to oversee the state's accountability system and school improvement efforts. Specific responsibilities outlined in statute include the following:

> 59-6-10 (4) recommend Education Accountability Act and EIA program changes to state agencies and other entities as it considers necessary; and

> 59-6-110 (3) monitor and evaluate the functioning of the public education system and its components, programs, policies, and practices and report annually its findings and recommendations in a report to the commission no later than February first of each year;

In keeping with these responsibilities, the EOC proposes the development of a long-term strategy to build the infrastructure of public education so that the system is capable of self-correction and exhibits the flexibility to address changes brought about by time and competition. [A minimum of] Six fundamental questions should be addressed:

(1) What experiences are essential so that all students accomplish the curriculum necessary to become good citizens, positive family members and productive workers?

> Projections from the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce and the Council on Competitiveness indicate a need for 85 percent of all workers to have earned a two or four-year college degree; in South Carolina today only 60 percent of students enter a degree program and even fewer earn the degree.[3] Only half of students graduate from high school in either four or five years; the 2000 Census indicates that 26 percent of young adults ages 17-24 do not have a high school diploma.[4]

(2) How can schools be governed to maintain their communities of interest and involvement yet administered in ways that support dynamic impact with fiscal efficiency?

> Work by Miley and Associates documents inefficiencies and disproportionate expenditures on leadership and operations in schools districts enrolling fewer than 2,500 students and enrolling more than 25,000 students.[5] Yet larger school districts or school communities often fail to achieve the relational trust researchers indicate is necessary for school reform.[6]

(3)   How can the educational delivery systems serving young people be integrated so that they complement and enable one another to achieve excellence?

> The South Carolina Chamber of Commerce and the Governor's Task Force on Workforce Development studies indicate that many students leave school (secondary or postsecondary) because the work is redundant and unchallenging. Both groups advocate models that recognize accomplishment rather than *seat time* and the use of cross system enrollment to provide opportunities for students to become effective workers—whether those programs are components of the K-12, the postsecondary or the independent workforce preparation systems.[7]

(4)   How do we ensure a professional education workforce that continually increases in competency and is available so that every school can achieve the system goals?

> As late as November 2004, South Carolina school districts reported over 400 vacancies in teaching positions.[8] Data published on the annual school and district report cards indicates that 5.3 percent of middle school and 8.6 percent of high school teachers were teaching with emergency or provisional certificates.[9] Neither of these statistics addresses actual teacher quality or success in teaching students.

(5)   How can we ensure that educational programs have access to facilities that support the achievement of our goals, without incurring inordinate community costs?

> Surveys conducted by the South Carolina State Department of Education and considered in a 2001 EOC study, indicate the following average age of South Carolina school facilities: high schools-34 years; middle schools-37 years and elementary schools-36 years.[10] The work suggests that the facilities are inadequate to deliver the curriculum, support technology and facilitate community involvement. The older, less adequate schools enroll significantly higher proportions of economically disadvantaged and underachieving students and are less able to attract faculty.

(6)   How can we identify and address the prerequisites of school success in the social, health, and economic lives of children?

> Nearly 20 percent of South Carolina's children under the age of 18 are living in poverty and regrettably suffering the impact of economic disadvantage upon their daily lives through inadequate nutrition, marginal health care, limited opportunity for cultural and recreational enrichment and few role models for learning.[11] [12] KidsCount 2003 publishes measures of child well-being and reports the negative impacts on all children, particularly African-American children. Slightly over half of African-American children are living in neighborhoods where a third or more of families are headed by females with no spouse; almost half of these children living in neighborhoods with more than 19 percent of individuals in poverty; over a third are living in neighborhoods with 15 percent of persons ages 16-19 who are dropouts and more than one-fifth living in neighborhoods with 38 percent or more of men unemployed. Ten percent of African-American children (in contrast to one percent of white children) live in neighborhoods with all four characteristics.[13]

The EOC proposes that a two-staged process be followed to develop the long-term strategy. The first stage is *Finding Common Ground* and would involve approximately 30 individuals chosen from the following groups: EOC, General Assembly, Governor Sanford, Palmetto Business Forum, Palmetto Institute, Palmetto State Teachers Association, South Carolina Association of School Administrators, South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, South Carolina Education Association, South Carolina School Boards Association, State Board of Education, State Superintendent of Education, other state agencies representing the interests of children and individuals representing parents, postsecondary education and the general public.

The second stage, *Building on Common Ground*, would engage the team members in the identification of actions and time lines to implement the strategies. This team could be expanded to include individuals with particular expertise in the areas of the strategies. The final plans would be coordinated in to a document used to guide gubernatorial, legislative and administrative agendas.

The stages would be implemented over the March-November 2005 period, providing opportunity for presentation of a legislative and administrative agenda in January 2006.

[1] Miley, Harry W. 2004. Presentation to Education Oversight Committee.

[2] South Carolina Department of Corrections, 2003. Profile of Inmates in Institutional County as of June 30, 2003.

[3] South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, 2002. The Workforce Gap.

[4] South Carolina Budget and Control Board, Division of Research and Statistics, 2004. South Carolina Statistical Abstract.

[5] Miley and Associates, 2003. School District Organization in South Carolina.

[6] Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, 2004. Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement.

[7] Governor's Task Force on Workforce Development, 2002. Pathways to Prosperity.

[8] South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement, 2004. Annual Report. .

[9] South Carolina State Department of Education, 2004. Annual School and District Report Cards.

[10] Stevenson, Ken R. 2001. A Study for the Education Oversight Committee: The Relationship of School Facilities Conditions to Selected Student Academic Outcomes.

[11] United States Census Bureau, 2002. South Carolina: Percent of Individuals Under 18 Living in Poverty, 1999.

[12] United Health Foundation: State Health Rankings 2002.

[13] KidsCount 2003. Measures of Child Wellbeing.